Inequalities in the Process of Agriculturalists Learning Non-agricultural Skills

To

The University of Trans-Disciplinary Health Sciences and Technology

THESIS SYNOPSIS

By

Student: Ajit Kumar Babu

Registration Number: 20418010326

Supervisor: Prof. Narendar Pani

National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru

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Synopsis

Formal education and learning skills have multiple associations with inequality. Similarly, inequality has multiple impacts on educational attainment and access to learning skills. This thesis explores the processes of learning skills, the impact of inequality on educational attainment, access to learning, and experiences in the processes of learning skills. Additionally, it examines the various consequences of inequality in learning skills on the standard of living and the ability to deal with the uncertain situations created by a shock like the COVID-19 pandemic. The thesis explores these broad questions in the context of one of the prominent forms of transformation, the movement out of agriculture in rural India.

Specifically, the thesis explores—what are the processes of learning involved when agriculturalists acquire non-agricultural skills. Under this broad question, it goes into the details to examine,

- Are there inequalities in these processes of learning non-agricultural skills?
- Do inequalities in learning these skills affect access to occupations?
- Does the learning contribute to innovation?
- How does uncertainty affect the entire arrangement, especially when there is a shock like the COVID crisis?

The thesis investigates these questions through a household survey and an ethnographic study of a village in Ramgarh district of Jharkhand. The data collected through the survey and the insights gained during the stay in the village for more than 20 months highlighted the dynamics of rural transformation which had its roots in the movement out of agriculture. This rural transformation process observed in the study village had multiple associations with the changing demand for skills. The changing demand for skills generated the need for learning. The differences in the rural transformation process had diverse impacts on the processes of learning skills. These differences in learning skills had multiple consequences on the existing inequalities and emerging inequalities.

The transformation of the village across multiple dimensions was reflected in the change in its spatial, social, economic and demographic profiles. The local narrative, which was consistent with the macro level data, revealed that major changes in the village were observed after 1991 with a sharp decline in the number of main agricultural workers to the total main workers. This

change in agriculture increased the supply of workers available for non-farm jobs. The increased supply of workers outside of agriculture, combined with the availability of low-cost dry land, contributed to the emergence of three large industries in the village and its periphery.

The establishment of large industrial plants in the village and its periphery changed the occupation structure. A section of villagers got access to industrial jobs in these local industrial units whereas a large section of workers was excluded from these non-agricultural opportunities. The section of workers who got access were largely from the landowning castes. These castes had sold land and in return negotiated for jobs in the industrial units along with their monetary compensation. This section of landowning castes were also seen investing in diverse non-agricultural activities near these industrial units. The demand generated by the industrial workers stimulated investment in trade around the industries. The monetary compensation received from these industrial units and the possession of land around the industrial area helped the landowning households invest in multiple businesses and other activities offering self-employment. These investments in various non-agricultural activities led to the emergence of a market around the local industrial plants on both sides of a metalled road, which connects the village with the nearby town at one end and to a renowned temple of the region at the other end. As the ownership of land, the industries bought was a route to jobs in the industries, the landless castes who had been excluded from the industrial jobs were also unable to find non-agricultural opportunities in the emerging market area.

The inequality in accessing non-farm jobs in the local industrial units and the inability to invest in the emerging market area generated pressure among a substantial section of workers to find work outside the village. The pressure to migrate outside the village for work originated from the mismatch between the supply of workers who sought work outside agriculture and the limited non-farm jobs in the village. This pressure to migrate was compounded by the increase in the competition for limited non-farm jobs with the practice of importing skilled workers for technical activities in the local industrial units. This practice began from the time when the industrial plants were under construction and extended to when these industries started fully functioning. This practice was further compounded after an irresolvable conflict arose from the accidental death of two workers from the village in one of the industrial plants. This incident not only raised the magnitude of immigration from other regions of Jharkhand and from other states to the village for industrial jobs but also increased the resistance to hiring workers from the village for these non-farm jobs. This incident also altered the occupational structure again.

The incident generated a new set of non-farm opportunities and at the same time increased the pressure to migrate from the village. For example, some villagers started functioning as middlemen to solve the local conflicts on behalf of the local industrial units and earn a fee. They also got the responsibility of supplying workers for industrial jobs. This process provided some landless non-SC/ST groups to access the non-farm jobs in the local industrial units. However, it raised the pressure to find work outside the village among most of the villagers. The middlemen preferred the immigrants rather than the local workers while providing access to industrial jobs to maximise their earnings. This further increased the pressure to migrate. The landless SC/ST caste groups largely bore this pressure to find work outside the village.

Those who bore the pressure to find work outside the village were excluded from the actual process of migration particularly when the workers needed to cross the district and state boundaries for better earnings. The need for initial migration capital and access to networks resulted in the exclusion of SC/ST caste groups from the migration process. In contrast, workers who had initial capital, such as the workers from the landholding castes and those who had members in the household who had government-salaried jobs, were able to arrange the initial migration capital to migrate outside the district and state. These workers from the landholding castes built on their interaction with immigrant workers from other regions of Jharkhand and other states in the factories to develop networks that facilitated migration. This inequality in migration led to the emergence of another set of workers who worked outside the village but at commuting distances.

Working at commuting distances became a significant phenomenon with the emergence of new settlements around the emerging market area. The new settlements developed with the increase in investment in the emerging market area. The magnitude of investment started increasing when migrant households began investing their remittances in the emerging market area. This process was compounded by the large scale of investment made by local immigrant elites. These elites were largely retired government service employees. These local elites invested not only in businesses and self-employment but also in real estate. This increase in investment mainly by the elites changed the nature of the emerging market and it converted to an elite market. This process pushed the small investors out of the market area and forced them to search for alternative means of earning at places outside the village at a commuting distance. The expansion of the market and increasing real estate activities reduced the spatial gap between the village and the nearby towns. These processes increased the non-agricultural

economic activities at commuting distances and made the process of commuting to the workplaces from the village a major daily activity.

The different dynamics of the rural transformation process in the village, which had its roots in the process of movement out of agriculture, changed the demand for skills. The sharp decline in the agricultural worker population and the excessive supply of workers for non-farm jobs increased the demand for non-agricultural skills. The change in location of the workplaces due to the pressure to migrate again altered the demand for skills. Further, the nature of the migration was a short-term process due to the dominance of assignment-based mobility. The male-dominated migration, where young male members of households migrated leaving the other household members in the village, again made the migration a short-term process. This short-term migration changed the demand for skills as the workers continuously changed the location of their workplace based on the availability of work outside the village. As the option of migration was not open to most of the older males, it influenced the occupational patterns of workers across different age groups. While a section of the older workers remained in agriculture, the younger workers moved to non-agricultural work. While the workers did seek to specialize in specific non-agricultural skills, the uncertainty in the availability of jobs often resulted in the workers being forced to learn more skills. Together with a tendency to return to agriculture when non-farm work was not available, workers tended to have multiple occupations which further altered the demand for skills.

The changing demands for skills necessitated a continuous process of learning skills. The formal approach to learning included academic education, and technical and vocational education and training. The fieldwork revealed that there were multiple barriers to attending formal academic educational institutions and accessing technical and vocational education and training. These constraints in formal education and learning skills increased the demand for informal learning. In Kusumpali, a major proportion of this informal learning took place in the workplace. Workplace learning required access to the workplaces which were spread across locations. The differences in the rural transformation process in the village generated the same set of differences in accessing workplaces and facilitating workplace learning of skills. The SC/ST caste groups who were excluded from the rural transformation process were excluded from workplace learning. In contrast, the landowning castes in the village who benefited from rural transformation had access to workplace learning. These differences across caste groups led to intergroup inequalities. The thesis also outlines intergroup inequality among the caste groups within the landless category as some of them such as the Ansaris got the benefits of

rural transformation and also the workplaces which facilitated their workplace learning. In contrast, the landless SC/ST caste groups were excluded from the rural transformation and also from the workplace learning processes.

Similarly, the women and old members in the groups who had been excluded from the rural transformation were excluded from the formal learning initiatives and also from the workplace learning, leading to interpersonal inequalities within the groups. The thesis also found that during a shock like the COVID-19 pandemic, the existing inequalities expanded. It revealed how a new set of intrapersonal inequalities emerged due to uncertain situations.

The mapping of experiences of the rural transformation process in Kusumpali reveals the dynamics of one of the prominent processes of transformation, that is, the movement out of agriculture. It also shows how the demand for skills has been changing as a part of the process of rural transformation. This thesis also shows why the formal approach to learning is insufficient to meet the need for learning generated by the rural transformation process. The thesis points to gaps in the formal skill development approach. In addition, the thesis maps the detailed process of learning involved when agriculturalists learn non-agricultural skills outside the formal system. One of the main findings of this thesis is the failure of the skill development initiatives in the country. This makes informality inevitable in the processes of learning non-agricultural skills during rural transformation.